One World or Three?

Notes for remarks by

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This conference, Mr. Chairman, in its essential elements, is a conference about geometry, about dimensions. Those simple words, one of Latin origin, the other of Greek, refer to measurement. (Is it necessary in this city to point out that they both precede the French Revolution and the birth of the metre by many hundreds of years?) What you have invited us to examine, in the guise of the North South Dialogue, is the magnitude of community - in spatial terms and in temporal terms; Cartesian coordinates, if I may be permitted the philosophic flippancy, locating matter and mind. Dimensions of two different sorts, but dimensions all the same.

My postulate this evening is the world. The word itself, according to Eric Partridge, is derived from the old Norse 'wer' - or man - as is found in werewolf, and 'ald' the old Germanic word for age. The combination - werald or world - becomes thus "the age of the earth inhabited by mankind." It is that sense of world, a world of human beings, that I refer to in my title "One World or Three?". A human world subsumes all others: "Old" or "New", "First" or "Third", even "Brave New". It is the notion of community.

There is a wonderful passage in W.O. Mitchell's "Who Has Seen the Wind" where the young hero, Brian, comes face to face with the realization that his childhood is ending and that his responsibilities now embrace others than himself.

It is a transition which is central to many important works of literature, ranging from Sophocles to Agee. Romantic authors often refer to the process as 'growing up'. Society calls the event "coming of age" or "maturing"; the moment when an individual passes beyond the stage of dependency, passes through, even, the intermediate phase of self-sufficiency and begins to assume the responsibilities that devolve on all full-fledged members of the community. The rites of passage vary from culture to culture, as does the moment of coming of age. Swahili boys as young as eight or nine are placed in charge of large numbers of animals - first goats, then cattle - and expected to take care of them through the long hours of daylight, following them as they graze, rounding up the strays, protecting the animals from marauders (including the feared simba), bringing them back safely at nightfall to the protection of the Kraal. In many developing countries, young girls well below the age of 10 are placed in charge of their younger siblings, often in addition to such tasks as gathering firewood and fetching water. In

industrialized countries, by contrast, urban youths pursue selfish, even indolent, life-styles often until they conclude their secondary education.

Yet whatever the culture, and whatever the age, the assumption of responsibility is an absolutely essential element in the concept and structure of community. There is more involved here than simply sharing burdens, or determining comparative advantage. More, too, than assisting in the defence of the village against outside raiders be they animal or human. This moment of maturation is evocative of natural selection, of survival, of acceptance, of participation, of determinism. Involved is the destiny of self, of family, of community, however defined.

There is no essential difference between the instincts of a young Mowgli, fending for his wolf-cub brethren in the presence of a cunning Shere Khan, and the musings of John Donne. Each understands he is not severable from his community, not able to survive alone, not capable of functioning fully absent the society of others.

The experiences which mark this transition from innocence to maturity are either within the control of the community or are a reflection of the environment within which it is

located. Some of the experiences are real; some are contrived and evocative of long ago events. The transition is most clearly marked in circumstances of ordeal or peril: of hostile climates, of predatory neighbours, of conditions of famine or plague, of aggression and war. Ironically, while responses to events of these often savage kind are in many instances characterized by acts of extraordinary selflessness, societal analysts are left to question whether communities not faced with immediate danger are able to produce and sustain among their inhabitants the same sense of dedication. If existentialism is alien to an isolated Inuit band, can utilitarianism or pragmatism flourish indefinitely in an affluent society not under seige? Is true maturity possible absent identifiable adversity?

Maturity contains, obviously, a special element: an awareness and acknowledgement of persons and events roundabout. There is involved an element of time as well, a projection forward, an anticipation of events yet to take place. Dr. Brock Chisholm, the Canadian who was the first Director General of the World Health Organization, often commented that an essential mark of a mature individual was that person's awareness of the future, and his acceptance of some responsibility for it by way of thoughtful preparation.

The linear extent of either of these dimensions of space and time is a reflection of a number of elements, and subject to a range of influences. Geography, theology, and science are all acutely involved. An animist tribe in Papua New Guinea is bounded by constraints and subject to stimuli quite distinct from the environment of a great university in metropolitan Vancouver. (I'm tempted to point out nevertheless that there are parallels to be drawn between cargo-cult beliefs in the South Pacific and the attitudes of some individuals in this country towards the functioning of a federal system of government.)

In my judgement, Mr. Chairman, it is the extent of these two dimensions of space and time that is the essential element of this conference. Given the absolute and universal phenomenon of individual responsibility, what criteria of measurement are desirable, possible, essential in a human species that, in terms of faith or philosophy, is answerable to standards more demanding than mere hedonism?

The origins of the concept of community - of responsibility in a spatial sense - are so rooted in the mists of time that they fit properly within the discipline of anthropology.

The concept itself, however, is of such continuing importance that it has occupied an important place in the work of scholars of philosophy from Aristotle to Locke to Sartre.

It would be easy, but simplistic and inaccurate, to describe 'community' as a spatially evolving concept - from village to city-state to duchy to nation-state to regional organization. That saga fits well into the description offered to visitors to the Benelux or European Community headquarters in Brussels where a rapid and fascinating glimpse at European history takes one through the centuries from Astérix-like settlements to the Treaty of Rome in half a dozen breath-taking moments. That example, however, is not universal. Atavistic yet very real aberrations defy the logic of this kind of progression. Nomadic groupings have watched history pass them by, sometimes as protesting witnesses - as in the case of many North-American Indian tribes, sometimes as conscious dissenters - as in the instance of eastern European gypsy bands, sometimes as ignorant innocents - as in the circumstance of many tribes in western Asia today. Bronowski speaks of one of these tribes - the Bakhtiari - that has not altered its habits in millenia:

> "It is a life without features. Every night is the end of a day like the last, and every morning will be the beginning of a journey like the day before .... nothing is memorable. Nomads have no memorials, even to the dead."

Again:

> "The Bakhtiari life is too narrow to have time or skill for specialization. There is no room for innovation, because there is no time, on the move, between evening and morning, coming and going all their lives, to develop a new device or a new thought - not even a new tune. The only habits that survive are the old habits. The only ambition of the son is to be like the father."

Life styles of this sort, or of those rooted in the defiant mix of chauvinism and xenophobia which is an African tribe, do not fit easily into a theory of coherent progression. Strong cultural and biological reasons sustain them. Much more disturbing, and much less defensible, are the ghetto-like tendencies found scattered throughout so many nations that have long passed the major milestones marking the transition from

nomadic to settled cultures, and from homogenous to pluralistic populations. Those who interpret community in an exceedingly confined sense, who advocate local autonomy in near-absolutist fashion, who support withdrawal and isolation, often act with deep sincerity and profound conviction that there is some essential merit in self-sufficiency. They believe that human dignity is a reflection of individual responsibility in its narrowest interpretation. They rely for their creed on those who they perceive to have been champions of self-government in the most site-specific sense. One such patriot hero is Thom. Paine, whose voluntary exile from England and whose later encouragement of the independence of the American colonies, is sometimes cited as an example whose principles have not faithfully been followed. To recall Thom. Paine in such a selective fashion is to do him a disservice, however. He wrote the memorable line, after all: "My country is the world."

Perhaps to none others is the demonstrated need for the broadest sense of community so great as it is to Canadians. Our geography, our climate, our history, our demographic reality are all elements of our dependence on distant neighbours for survival and for accomplishment. In the early decades of the history of much of what is now Canada, (and continuing still in many parts of this land), the combination of inhospitable climate

and daunting distances lent to a stranger the character of a welcome friend, not of a suspect as is so familiar in many cultures. Our struggles as a people to extract a living from an oft-barren landscape, to adapt new technologies to stubborn circumstances, to share broadly the hard-won benefits of development, and to survive as a political entity in a world where interests often hostile to our own are powerful and pervasive - all these have contributed to an awareness that our community must extend far beyond our town, provincial or even national boundaries. Canada's size and its circumstance demand that it rely for advancement of its interests on persuasion, not on force. Our very existence depends on order not on anarchy. For that reason, successive Canadian governments have chosen to expand the Canadian neighbourhood by joining broad-based organizations, groupings and associations, there to exert influence in favour of our view of community. Among the powerful we do not always find ourselves part of the majority. We are in this sense the odd man; but the odd man in, as must be the case.

The full and popular realization that the human species is a single, identifiable whole was a consequence of the work not of philosophers or humanists, but of physical scientists. Earth orbiting satellites transmitted photographs of the planet

in its proud, yet somehow humble solitary state. The term biosphere suddenly assumed new meaning for millions of persons who had previously given little thought to environmental degradation. The awesome destructive power of nuclear explosive devices and the ever-increasing accuracy and range of sophisticated delivery systems brought home the prospect of global holocaust to even the most isolated of settlements. No longer, anywhere, was there talk of "Fireproof-Houses". In its place were new phrases: Marshal McLuhan's "Global Village" and Barbara Ward's "Spaceship Earth".

These images contained dimensions additional to the physical, born of different disciplines; concepts of cultural benefit and economic interdependence. With a speed so bewildering that multitudes have yet to grasp its significance the combination of physical and economic circumstance has created an entirely new reality: a community of global dimensions. It is one that respects the dignity of individuals in a fashion quite distinct from earlier perceptions.

No longer, in this community, can war realistically be regarded as a rational instrument - "diplomacy by other means"; no longer can political instability be interpreted as a local

phenomenon, subject to containment; no longer can economic advantage be measured in zero-sum terms. Now is evidence at hand of undiscriminating consequences should migratory environmental infection not be treated; now is there realization of the irreversible error of nuclear war; now can economic advantage and disadvantage be traced and identified as a seamless web enveloping the planet, dipping in and out indiscriminately of economies both rudimentary and sophisticated.

In a community of this size, of these dimensions, and of this complexity, orderly processes of value determination, of crisis management, of dispute settlement, of rule making and adjudication, are all essential. Finally has fact in the form of demonstrative evidence come forward to support the age-old metaphysical descriptions of the family of man. More is involved, however, than mere assertion and acceptance. Faith without effort is inadequate. Goethe offered two centuries ago an apologia which no longer obtains when he said, "Man was not borne to solve the problems of the universe, but rather to seek to lay bare the heart of the problem and then confine himself within the limits of what is amenable to understanding." Man has in some respects solved the problem of the universe, but the solutions are incomplete because they consist only of a scientific dimension. Until they are made whole with a humanistic rationale and

a functioning political structure, humankind is in great peril. "What is amenable to understanding" lays somewhere this side of faith. It consists of much more, however, than laws of physics and biology. Aristotle's precepts of man as a political animal must be interpreted in a non-Hobbesian formula. The future of our species depends on it.

In the abstract, reason always prevails. It is in its application that opposition takes form, for here is joined the issue of privilege and denial; here one comes face to face with the brutal reality of disparity of advantage and disparity of power. This is the nexus of dialogue and reality. Martin Luther King wrote, in his letter from Birmingham City Jail, that "History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals."

In that same letter, King stated, "We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability." Effort is always required. Intellectual effort, political effort, human effort. But effort without focus and without a sound philosophic foundation is unlikely to be effective. It is

at this point that there enters a jarring element in any debate on community or social responsibility.

"Absent effectiveness", say the practical minded, "effort is mis-guided."

True, perhaps.

"Better that more immediate objectives be engaged with accomplishment than distant and difficult tasks be pursued without success", they say.

Not true.

"Distant and difficult" may be described in either the temporal or spatial sense. The latter sense was certainly evident as William Wilberforce undertook his efforts to suppress the slave trade. Evident then as now were cynicism, privilege, and prejudice. Yet Wilberforce prevailed and nowhere today would a voice be raised either to minimize the difficulties that he faced or the monumental scope of his accomplishment.

"Distant and difficult" in the temporal sense were the circumstances facing Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt as they prepared, in the darkest days of World War II, for the post-war era. Even as they acted as military commanders, they assumed the roles of architects of a new global structure. It was in August of 1941, in the darkest days of the European war, that they issued the Atlantic Charter which pointed to a world of self-governing nations, of free trade and economic prosperity, of improved labour standards and social security, of disarmament and disavowal of the use of force. Later they stimulated the Bretton Woods and Dumbarton Oaks conferences. Were dissenting voices raised urging attention to 'first things first', they were surely unceremoniously squelched by these two great statesmen. And thus did unborn generations become the beneficiaries both of the temporal and the spatial interpretations of communal responsibility held by Churchill and Roosevelt.

A contemporary advocate of present responsibility for future events is Peter Drucker. He has written that the requirements of our age are "tasks of today, and not tasks for the year 2000. But they are the tasks to which we have to address ourselves to deserve tomorrow."

In this age when an expanded sense of community is critical to a civilization of any degree of quality, there exist immensely strong centripetal pressures. Notwithstanding Paulo Freire's admonition that "The pursuit of full humanity cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity", and notwithstanding the obvious dictum that a community cannot be self-sustaining without the contribution of the majority, a sentiment of almost mystical proportions has arisen in recent years in support of opting-out. Attaching blame for sickness in society, without contributing a cure for which one is prepared to accept responsibility, has become a popular pastime in the industrial democracies in recent years. It flourishes as a sophomoric pursuit in radio talk shows and in exchanges between newspaper editors and their readers.

Pierre Trudeau commented on that phenomenon not long ago. "In a mature society", he said, "responsibility is not assigned, it is assumed."

The futility of the ghetto as a guardian of communal standards and the ineffectualness of castle walls, of moats and drawbridges, as protection against alien adversaries was demonstrated beyond question in the middle ages. Nevertheless, a

ghetto mentality is far from unknown in our own time. It is accepted, even encouraged, by many who view with alarm the complexity of the modern world and, ironically, by others who choose to ignore the complexities, who trumpet the superiority of a false simplicity.

Such an interpretation of community, in the most restricted scale of time and size, is intensely appealing in an age of terrifying prospects. Yet its appeal is as false - and for the same reasons - as is the brilliant interrogation of Christ by the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevski's "The Brothers Karamazov". And, for those same reasons, it must be countered and rejected.

When individuals choose to withdraw, it is sad. When public leaders, sensing the populism of these sentiments, do so, it is tragic. The abdication of responsibility - by assigning it elsewhere, and the abandonment of the broadest concept of community - by withdrawing inward, threaten at this most perilous period the survival of humankind. Irreversible error is a circumstance never before approached by civilization as a whole. Awareness, concentration, and dedication are the qualities now in demand.

Gibbon wrote of different times and different circumstances. Nevertheless, his summation of the fate of Athens rests on principles applicable to today's time and to today's circumstance.

"In the end," he wrote, "more than they wanted freedom, they wanted security. They wanted a comfortable life and they lost it all - security, comfort and freedom.... When the Athenians finally wanted not to give to society but for society to give to them, when the freedom they wished for most was freedom from responsibility, then Athens ceased to be free."

I have come full circle, Mr. Chairman; from the principle of mature responsibility, to the concept of a community not limited by dimensions of space or time, and back again to responsibility. In the course of the next two days specialists will address themselves to the several elements of those dimensions.

My final words are to emphasize that there is no necessary contradiction between geometry and humanism. Euclid himself would have been astonished at any such suggestion. Equally, I submit, geometric dimension need not be linear and

sparse and cold. Extended and interpreted by human qualities - love, compassion, understanding, and integrity - the lines soften and curve. "World" becomes wholistic, yet far from intimidating. Permit me to invoke by way of benediction the words of a great Canadian, Frank Scott, as he contemplated the several dimensions of community:

"The world is my country
The human race is my race
The spirit of man is my God
The future of man is my heaven."